

The Believer's Hope of Heaven

by Rev. Tom Aicken

The Bible describes heaven in two rather different ways, and that is because it portrays this inheritance of God's people in two very different states of the believer's being. The first phase is what we call the intermediate state, and we call it that because this is what heaven is like for believers who inhabit it right now and will continue to do so throughout this present age of grace. This is where the spirit of the one ransomed of the Lord goes the instant he dies – the very moment he passes from this life into the next – his body in due time will be disposed of in one way or another, whether buried or cremated, but his spirit enters immediately into this intermediate state of heaven. The second phase is the final state, what heaven will be like for believers at the end of the world when Jesus comes again, when He raises the believer's body and reunites it with his spirit, and so will all God's people be, spirit and body together again, and will continue to be in this final state of heaven for all eternity.

There may be different levels of heaven (see 2 Cor. 12:2), but I am writing here in this paper of only two different states of believers in heaven, one a present state and the other which is yet to come. Moreover, when I write of "believers" I am not referring simply to people who believe that there is a heaven, and have persuaded themselves that they will one day go there, but am referring rather to the redeemed of the Lord, to those who have been made a new creation in Christ Jesus, have received the Holy Spirit as the deposit of their inheritance and are trusting in Christ, not themselves or anyone else, to take them home to these mansions above. Many of these believers may be weak in faith and not have the assurance of salvation that they desire and should seek to have. Nevertheless, theirs is an inheritance reserved in heaven for them, and they are kept by the power of God through faith for all that is yet to be revealed to them (1 Pet. 1:4,5).

Let us examine what we know of the intermediate state. Here are three indisputable points: (1) It is to dwell in the very presence of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), no longer to wait *for* His coming, but to wait *upon* Him in uninterrupted fellowship forever; (2) It is not only to be *declared* fully righteous (which already happened the moment we believed), but now at last to be *made* fully righteous (1 John 3:2), to be free of even the inclination to sin, of the misery that sin brings, and of the

possibility of ever sinning again; and (3) It is to experience more intense joy, greater knowledge of Christ, and a closer communion with Him than anything we had ever gained in our earthly pilgrimage (Phil. 1:21-23).

As wonderful as all this is, however, the joy of believers will not be made full and complete until we enter our final state. Here, then, are two more things that we need to learn about the intermediate state and why it is that it falls short of what God has ultimately intended for His people and has yet to give us: (1) Though this intermediate state is a place where there is no more sin, it is also a place where we are made very aware that sins and vile atrocities are still being committed here on earth, and that those who have been martyred for the faith have in too many cases still not received any justice for crimes that others have committed against them. The spirits of those who had been slain for the word of God cry out from heaven, "How long, O Lord, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:9-11).

(2) Because our love for the Lord is made pure at last, and because we have come also to a full and uncompromising commitment to all His ways, the intermediate state of heaven is a place where believers long, not only for the punishment of the wicked but for the joy of seeing all the redeemed of the Lord brought home to glory. Moreover, the intermediate state of heaven is a place where the spirits of believers long for the day of Christ's return to the earth when He will raise our bodies from the grave, reunite our spirits with these resurrected bodies, and do so to the end that we might at last serve the Lord and sing His praises with all our fully restored being (Rom. 8:18-23). And one more thing: the intermediate state of heaven is a place where believers long earnestly for the ultimate vindication of Christ's Person and work, for that day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess, whether willingly or even unwillingly, that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11). Indeed, to love the Lord with all our being like this, to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, we cannot be fully satisfied until we see this perfect and altogether glorious fulfillment of all God's eternal purpose, and that cannot be, as I say, until the end of this present world order and our final state becomes a reality. The intermediate state is a joyful place, to be sure, but its residents acknowledge that the final state is even better for these reasons and so we will still yearn to enter it.

In spite of all the above, though, there are two particular fears that many Christians often have regarding the intermediate state, and, as long as these fears persist, it is difficult to appreciate all the advantages of this coming glory. Let us therefore address these fears from Holy Scripture and learn how it is that they are not the frightening obstacles that we may too easily imagine them to be.

The first fear relates to the decomposition of the body, the fact that it disintegrates in the ground and returns to dust (Eccl. 3:20). There are those who consider this process unimaginable, and, as a result, they can only reflect on it in absolute horror. Here are three things to consider: (1) The Bible describes death for the believer as “falling asleep” (1 Cor. 15:18) – which is to say that the body is to sleep in the ground, not the spirit which has already departed to be with the Lord – and it is set forth in this way to emphasize the temporary nature of this decommissioned state of the body, temporary because it is to wake up at an appointed time and be resurrected from the grave. It will be the same body that is later raised, but it will be changed to suit its new and from then on permanent environment. The body will put on incorruption and immortality (vv. 52-54) to the end that it may live and continue to prosper forever in the presence of the Lord.

(2) The spirit, as we have noted, will not be present or be in any way affected by the body when it is laid to rest. As J.C. Ryle has written, “The very moment a believer dies his soul is in happiness and in safe keeping. His full redemption is not yet come. His perfect bliss will not begin before the resurrection morning. But there is no mysterious delay, no season of suspense, no purgatory between his death and a state of reward. In the day that he breathes his last he goes to paradise. In the hour that he departs he is with Christ.” Even now, therefore, the spirit need not fear this renovation process of the body, or consider it negatively, but may look forward with eager anticipation to the thorough transformation it will produce with only positive results for the whole man. And (3) for people who wonder how God could ever recreate bodies from dust, and for some this is as disconcerting and as inconceivable as anything else they might consider, let it be remembered that it was from dust that we were created in the first place (Gen. 2:7). Everything else was made without having had prior existence (Heb. 11:3), but let man consider his humble beginning, created from dust to be made in the image of God, and so will our bodies be recreated from dust, believer, and we will be presented faultless to stand before Him (Jude 24).

The second fear has to do with the wellbeing of the spirit apart from the body. How can the spirit survive, let alone prosper, without the body in this intermediate state? It seems that this was a problem for some Christians in Corinth, and so Paul addressed this subject in 2 Cor. 5. He writes there of our body as an earthly house, or tent, something only temporary in its present state and intended in due time to be taken down. But, he writes, we will be given another building from God when this first dwelling is demolished. Clearly, this house, not built by human hands but one that is prepared for us and constructed to last forever, is the one with many mansions (John 14:1-3). It is fully furnished and well stocked, and, whether with or without the body, it will provide everything the spirit needs to flourish.

The point here is that we do not need, beloved, to fear for the wellbeing of the spirit for that time it is to be separated from the body. It is in the Lord, after all, that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Is He not able, then, to take care of us wherever He places us? If He will not allow us in this world to be tempted beyond what we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13), how is it that He would subject us in the world to come to any terror that could at any moment destroy us? Our heavenly Father who feeds the birds of the air (Matt. 6:26), and will not allow even one of them to fall to the ground apart from His will (Matt. 10:29), does He not consider us to be of more value than they?

With confidence, therefore, we can groan with earnest desire for this heavenly habitation, and we can do so with the conviction that, being so surrounded and fully enveloped with the Lord's care, we shall not in any way be found destitute. Our desire is not to give up this body, as Paul says, which for so many people has served us very well, but to enter heaven – where Christ Himself is – which is far better. Do we have any doubts, believer, that such a glorious inheritance awaits us, or that it is just beyond the veil? It is the Lord Himself who has prepared it for us, who has preserved us for that special day, and He has given us the Holy Spirit as the deposit to assure us of that inheritance. Read 2 Cor. 5:1-5.

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9). Rejoice, believer, that our God who supplies all our need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19) will yet do so even in the intermediate state of heaven!